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EPA report: Secondhand smoke kills 3,000 annually

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NEW YORK — (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency will release a long-delayed report that says secondhand cigarette smoke is a human carcinogen and kills about 3,000 nonsmokers a year because of lung cancer, agency officials said Tuesday.

The report, to be released Thursday, also concludes that secondhand smoke increases the risk of pneumonia and bronchitis in children.

Release of the report, after more than two years of revisions, could trigger an avalanche of federal, state and local regulations limiting smoking in public places, health advocates said.

"Having the EPA's imprimatur on this is extremely important," said Dr. Alfred Munzer, a spokesman for the Coalition on Smoking or Health, which includes the American Lung Association, the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society.

"We believe this will motivate state governments, local governments to enact further regulations limiting smoking in public places."

The report also could prod the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to regulate smoking in the workplace, health advocates said. Douglas Fuller, an OSHA spokesman, said the agency would weigh the EPA report in its deliberations.

Munzer called on President Bush to use the report to justify an order restricting smoking in federal buildings.

"This is far less controversial than the pardons he has issued and would do a tremendous amount for the public health," Munzer said.

The report concludes that secondhand smoke is a proven human carcinogen, putting it in the same class as asbestos, benzene and radon, EPA officials said.

The report's authors assert that cigarette smoke causes about 3,000 lung-cancer deaths in nonsmokers annually, and that it increases the risk of pneumonia, bronchitis, and middle-ear disorders in children.

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Dr. ALFRED MUNZER,
of the Coalition on Smoking or Health

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The report also concludes that cigarette smoke increases the severity and frequency of asthma in children, EPA officials said.

The EPA has decided to kill a second report that links secondhand smoke to 37,000 heart-disease deaths annually, said Robert Axelrad, head of the EPA's indoor-air division. The report originally was conceived to be a companion to the lung-cancer report.

The link between cigarette smoke and heart disease is considered even more explosive than the lung-cancer link because cigarette smoke causes roughly 10 times as many heart-disease as lung-cancer deaths.

The heart association has petitioned the EPA to do its own study of secondhand smoke and heart disease, but the agency has not responded.

The lung-cancer report was the focus of a massive lobbying campaign by the tobacco industry and its allies in Congress. They submitted hundreds of pages of documents to the EPA during the past two years in an effort to delay or water down the report.

Despite the campaign, the EPA refused to retreat from its condemnation of tobacco smoke as a human carcinogen and a dangerous indoor air pollutant.

Brennan Dawson, a spokeswoman for the Tobacco Institute, said that despite the report's revisions, its conclusions are still not supported by existing scientific data.

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